Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

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Citation

Cox, David Harold. 1977. 'Review of *Varese: A Looking-Glass Diary, Volume 1: 1883-1928* by Louise Varèse'. ***Contact***, 16. pp. 21-23. ISSN 0308-5066.

VARESE: A LOOKING-GLASS DIARY, Volume I: 1883-1928, by Louise Varèse
Eulenburg Books, paperback edition, 1975 (£3.00)

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Our assessment of Edgard Varèse is still evolving as more comes to be known about the man and his music. In providing information on Varèse's character and life, this book written by his wife is the most important contribution to date and likely always to remain the primary source of our background knowledge of the composer.[1]

However, apart from recounting the contemporary opinions of the composer's work (which were often so ludicrously inaccurate that they are only of interest in that they show the astonishing inability of critics in the 1920s to make informed judgements on the music of their own time), there is no attempt here to consider the music's lasting qualities or to revalue it in the light of the generally more sympathetic attitude we take to Varèse today. His other biographer, Fernand Ouellette,[2] does attempt his own evaluation of the music, but in a rather naive though enthusiastic manner: the approach of a music lover rather than a musician. It is not realistic to expect Madame Varèse, so close to her husband and his work, to do better than this and attempt the impartial assessment Varèse's work really needs at this time. Instead her musical judgements are based on the literal quotation of Varèse's extensive public utterances about his music, though it is a pity that references to the composer's more private opinions remain intriguingly rare.

That Varèse was the most uncompromising of composers is evident from only a cursory examination of his aesthetic and of his musical language. These characteristics can be traced back to the fashionable, but in this case genuine, situation of an unhappy childhood. Varèse was the eldest child of an unhappy marriage and grew up in an atmosphere of tension which frequently exploded into violence; his distaste for his father very quickly hardened into outright hostility, hatred and total rejection of parental authority.

One of the most penetrating insights into Varèse's character that Madame Varèse provides comes in the first few pages: '... suddenly he became furious and I was confronted by a stranger ... A complete change of personality occurred in an instant. What he said I hardly took in, but the brutality with which he spoke, the cruelty and coldness of his look horrified me as it astounded me ... All I could think was: "This is what his father must have been like."' Many of the problems the family encountered may well have been the result of Varèse being too like his father, but whereas the father's latent aggression was released in outbursts of physical violence, in the son's case it was channelled into artistic creation.

The paradoxical effect of controlled uncontrollable violence one feels released in those terrifying aggregations of incisive Varèsian sound arose from an experience deep within the composer's soul, an experience recreated in sound with integrity and vision rather than out of the more superficial desire to gain a temporary notoriety by shocking his audiences with an artificially adopted harsh and brutal musical language.

It is a feature of both biographies that details of Varèse's early life are sparse and in that they seem to have been transmitted only by the composer himself: possibly rather one-sidedly. It is unlikely that Varèse's father was quite the monster the composer depicted, but there is no doubt of the permanent effect he had on his child. Varese's hatred of parental authority was obsessive and quickly transferred into other relationships. Anyone who established authority over him soon discovered that it was strongly resented, and as a student he quarrelled with the head of the Schola Cantorum, D'Indy, and with the head of the Conservatoire, Fauré. Most significant of all, Varèse's opposition to the domination of any system in the sphere of musical creation originated in this hatred of arbitrary discipline being imposed upon him. The cause of his uncompromising attitudes, his continual emphasis on originality rather than imitation, can be traced back to the experiences of his childhood, which created a character intolerant of authority, fiercely determined, with a potentially violent temperament that under control could be transformed into the unique language of his music.

If the general effect of Varèse's childhood experiences is clear, its detailed sequence of events is not, and the two biographies available do present conflicting information at times: for example, Ouellette places the early death of Varèse's mother in 1900 shortly after a visit to Paris, whereas Madame Varèse states that it occurred when Varèse was 14, three years earlier in 1897. Whenever it took place there is no doubt that of all the events in Varèse's early life this made the most profound impression on him. 'Knowing that she was dying, she asked for her eldest son and when they were left alone she said to him: . . . "Protect your brothers; your father is an assassin . . . "' Varèse's attempts to follow this advice brought the father-son conflict to a crisis which was only resolved when Varèse left home for Paris in 1903.

Once their subject has arrived in Paris, Varèse's biographers recount his early musical successes with some pride. The most important event in the life of a composer — his first publication — both totally omit; the brief three-page setting of Verlaine's *Un Grand Sommeil Noir,* released in 1905, was one success that Varese apparently chose not to reveal, although Madame Varese mentions the titles of a number of works — *Colloque au Bord de la Fontaine, Apothéose de l'Ocean* (had Varèse already fallen under the spell of *La Mer*?) *Dans Le Parc* and *Poème des Brumes* — from this period of whose existence one would otherwise be unaware. Nevertheless the song does exist and as the only surviving example of what Varèse's music was like in those European years at least deserves consideration from his future biographers, as well as being a powerful work that fully merits performance in its own right.[3]

Not surprisingly Madame Varèse's biography becomes much more detailed after she met Varèse in New York in 1918. From this point onwards the title of the book becomes increasingly appropriate as people, events and anecdotes pass through the pages in rapid succession. Indeed trivial encounters are recounted in such faithful detail that the book occasionally loses its readable style.

The most important area given extended treatment by Madame Varèse is her account of the history of the International Composers Guild founded by Varèse with Carlos Salzedo in 1921. The ICG transformed American musical life by introducing contemporary music to a general public only aware of the traditional classical repertoire. In so doing the ICG was rocked by several scandals relating to both the effect of its programmes and to the organisation of its internal politics. At times Varèse seems to have had as much difficulty in dealing with his patrons as with his critics.

Of the genesis of Varèse's own creative work at this time, Madame Varèse's biography reveals little apart from a most interesting sequence of letters written to his wife from Europe concerning the initial work on *Arcana.* They show how, after *Intégrales,* Varèse was driven to write again for large-scale orchestral resources regardless of whether the resulting composition was played, and give a description of the origin of some of the opening bars of the work, one of the best examples we have of how Varèse's sonic inspiration was frequently stimulated by the visual imagination of the play of light, colour and movement. Incidentally, in these earliest references to the work, Varèse was already using the title 'Arcanes', a fact that detracts from Ouellette's explanation of its origin as being coincidentally adopted during its composition as a result of Madame Varèse having shown her husband a copy of the writings of Paracelsus, Monarch of Arcana: in any case a movement difficult to achieve when one party is in New York and the other in Paris.

Madame Varèse's first volume is both suitable as a general introduction to the work of the composer for those who approach his music without the benefit of musical training and for the enthusiast and scholar who wishes to deepen his knowledge of one of the most original composers of our time, in that it provides

background information not otherwise available. One only hopes that it will soon be accompanied by the second volume which should throw some much needed light on one of the most vital parts of Varèse's life, the period of apparent silence between 1936 and 1954, which saw the genesis and composition of one of the most crucial works of the Varesian repertoire — *Déserts*.

NOTES:

[1]It was originally published in the USA in 1972 by W. W. Norton and Co. Inc. and in this country in 1973 by Davis-Poynter Ltd.

[2]Fernand Ouellette, trans. Derek Coltman, *A Biography of Edgard Varèse* (New York: The Orion Press, 1968).

[3]David Harold Cox's paper on Varèse given at the First American Music Conference at Keele University in 1975, which contained an extended discussion of this song, will be published by the US Embassy in its edition of the conference proceedings. (Ed.)